

North Indian Folk-Lore about Thieves and Robbers.—By ÇARAT CANDRA MITRA, Corresponding Member of the Anthropological Society of Bombay.

[Read July 1894.]

Every profession, not excepting even that of the light-fingered gentry, has its gods and goddesses, to whom the persons following that profession pay their homage for success. The vegetable-sellers of Bihār have their gods. The Kahārs (कहार) or palankeen-bearers, and the Mallāhs (मल्लाह), or boatmen of Bihār, also worship particular deities who, they believe, watch over their welfare and safety. Indian thieves and robbers, and the rest of the marauding fraternity, have also particular goddesses whom they worship in the belief that success or otherwise in their pilfering expeditions depends on the favors or frowns of those female deities. To this end, they take care to propitiate the said goddesses by offering up *pūjā* in the shape of sweets, cereals, and, sometimes even animal sacrifices, before starting on their expeditions. Curiously enough, a female deity is invariably found to be the tutelary patroness of the Indian robbers and thieves. She is known in different parts of Northern India, as the goddess Dēvī or Kālī in her various forms and under various names. In Bengal, thieves and robbers are supposed to enjoy the special protection of Kālī. In the North-Western Provinces and the Pañjāb, she is also worshipped by the light-fingered gentry under the name of Dēvī, or Mātā. The Ṭhags, who raised the profession of robbery by throttling and strangulation into a semi-religious cult, also worshipped this Dēvī or Mātā, to whom they invariably paid their devotions before starting on their marauding expeditions, and from whom they drew omens portending the success or otherwise of their undertaking. Colonel Sleeman, well-known as the Superintendent of the operations for the Suppression of Ṭhagī and Dakaitī in India, has given detailed information of the various rites practised by the Ṭhags, and of their superstitions, in his work entitled "*Ramaseeana, or the Secret Language of the Thugs.*" The curious enquirer may also find additional information on the

subject, and gain peeps into the inner mysteries of a Thag's daily life in a work of fiction entitled "*The Confessions of a Thug*," by that well-known Anglo-Indian novelist, Colonel Meadows Taylor.

In Bengal, thieves and robbers are believed to enjoy the special protection of the goddess Kālī. Up to the time that the British rule was established on a firm footing in Bengal, *ḍakaitī* and robbery were rife in that part of the country. Before the *ḍakāits* started on their expeditions they used to offer up *pūjā* to the goddess to ensure their success, and, after returning from a foray, used to make her an offering of part of the booty by way of thanksgiving. It is said that, in those days, the temple of the goddess Kālī at Kālīghāṭ, south of Calcutta, and the temple¹ of the goddess Citreṣvarī—a form of Kālī—at Chitpore in the Northern Suburbs of Calcutta, were much resorted to by *ḍakāits* and robbers who used to worship their patron-deity there.

The shrine of the deity Tāraknāth—an incarnation of Çiva—at Tārakēṣvar (Tarkessur) in the Hugli District, has from time immemorial been regarded as a very important place of pilgrimage by the Hindūs of Bengal. At the present time, a branch line of the East Indian Railway has been opened from the Sheoraphuli station of that railway to Tārakēṣvar, which conveys the pilgrims safely to that shrine. But, in the pre-railway days, when the *Pax Britannica* had not been firmly established, almost all the pilgrims had to travel thither on foot or by bullock-carts. These pilgrims, in many cases, used to take with them rich and costly articles for offerings to the lord Tāraknāth. These excited the cupidity of the marauding fraternity; and a colony of *ḍakāits* had accordingly established itself near a village named Singur—now a station on the Tārakēṣvar Branch Railway—which was situated close to the highway which led to the shrine of Tārakēṣvar. These freebooters ostensibly led the lives of peaceful agriculturists by day time, but during the night, they would sally forth from their homes, armed with *lāṭhīs*, and prowling about the highway, would rob belated travellers of their belongings, and often murder them in order to get at their valuables. A place named *Kaikālār māṭ* (the maidān of Kaikālā—a village in that neighbourhood) was the scene of many of these atrocities; and, in those days, the very mention of the name of that place was enough to send a thrill of horror through the hearts of the pilgrims and wayfarers. These *ḍakāits* are said to have enjoyed the protection of a goddess Kālī whose temple is situated in the aforesaid village of Singur, and exists there to this day. They used to worship here before starting on their plundering expeditions

¹ In this shrine, human sacrifices, it is said, used to be offered to this goddess in days gone by.

and, on their return, used to make valuable offerings out of the rich booty secured. This goddess was and is still known as *ḍākātē Kālī* or the goddess Kālī of the *ḍakāits*, and enjoys the reputation of having been the favorite deity of those marauders of Singur.

It is said that 'there is honour even among thieves,' and the *Dakāits* of Bengal were not wanting in this respect. Before they committed *ḍakaitī* in a person's house, they used to send an anonymous letter to the good man thereof informing him of their intention to do so. One night, they would gather together in armed bands, and, with lighted torches, invade the house. After reaching the place, they used to indulge in sword-play which they called *ḍhālī pāk khēlā* yelling loudly all the time. Thereafter they attacked the house. If they saw any danger of being captured, or if any of them got killed, they used to bawl out *māchī paṛechē* 'a fly has got caught,' and then cleared out of the place as fast as their heels could carry them.

In the Pañjāb also, the thieves and robbers used to sacrifice goats or sheep before, or made offerings of sweetmeats to, their *Dēvī* or goddess, in order to propitiate her and obtain the boon from her that they might be successful throughout the year in their plundering expeditions. On the occasions of such worship fairs were held. One such fair is held even at the present day at the village of Mansā *Dēvī*, four miles from Caṇḍigarḥ, on the way to Kālkā, in the Ambālā District. The following account of this fair appeared in the *Civil and Military Gazette* of Lahore, and was quoted in the *Calcutta Statesman* of Wednesday, the 18th April 1894.

'*An Ancient Thieves' Fair.*—Another Fair has been held in the Ambālā district at Mansā *Dēvī*, four miles from Caṇḍigarḥ on the way to Kālkā. Owing to the zemindars being engaged in cutting their harvests, and the Hardwār and Amritsar Baisākhī Fairs being on at the same time, the gathering was unusually small. For all that, however, there were some 20,000 people present. *This was in days gone by essentially a Thieves' Fair, in which the robbers made their offerings of goats, sheep, or sweetmeats at the shrine of their dēvī or goddess, and prayed that they might be successful throughout the year in their various plundering expeditions.* At the present time the ceremony is a novel and pleasing sight. The men and women are all dressed in their gorgeous holiday attire, and, having made their offerings, they gather together in lots and sing, dance, and make merry, generally for a couple of days when they leave for their homes after a dip in the well-known Gaggar, a stream which appears to be sacred to the hill people.'

In Bengal, it is popularly believed that in many cases thieves elude detection and capture because the goddess Kālī has granted them the

boon of protection from all danger *cōr'dēr upar Kālīr bar āchē*. Thieves almost always commit thefts during the dark half of the moon—the worship of the goddess Kālī taking place on the 15th day of the waning period of the moon. There is a popular superstition amongst the Bengalis that if a male child be born on the *amāvasyā*, or the 15th day of the dark half of the moon, the child will become a thief, as that day is consecrated to Kālī—the goddess of thieves and robbers.

Bengali and Bihārī burglars (*sindhēl cōr*) are said to get their iron hooks (*sindh-kāṭī*)—instruments with which they make holes in the walls of buildings for the purpose of effecting their entrance therein, and which are the prototypes of the 'jemmy' of European burglars—manufactured in the following way. A burglar secretly goes to an iron-smith's (*lohār* of Bihār and *kāmār* of Bengal) shop during the night, and there deposits a piece of iron, and some pice by way of wages. In the morning, the iron-smith, finding the iron and the pice, understands that they had been left there by some thief with a view to have the same turned into a 'jemmy.' The ironsmith manufactures it accordingly and, during the night, deposits it at the exact spot where the iron had been left by the thief. The thief comes thither secretly during the night and takes it away. Hence is the origin of the Bengali saying *cōrē kāmārē dyākhā nāi* or *cōrē kāmārē sākṣāt nāi* (there is no interview between a thief and a blacksmith). This saying is often cited when speaking of a person who gains his object or performs a certain act without having a personal interview with the person who has the power to grant that object, or to whom he is in duty bound to perform that act. Hence it is popularly believed that thieves and burglars never commit thefts in ironsmiths' houses, out of gratitude to the latter. It is another instance of 'honour among thieves.'

Thieves play an important part in the proverbial philosophy of the Bengali people. When one person of bad character is likened to another of the same description, we say *cōrē cōrē mās'tuta bhāi* or thieves are cousins (mother's sister's sons) to one another. When one person defrauds another of his ill-gotten gains, the former is said to practise *cōrēr upar bat'pārī* or fraud on a thief. *Cōr palālē buddhī bār'hē* or 'shutting the stable door after the steed is stolen,' is applied to persons who become wise after the event. Thieves, when caught red-handed, are often thrashed within an inch of their very lives. Hence *cōrēr mār* or 'a beating administered to thieves,' is proverbially synonymous with a severe thrashing. If a person is severely thrashed, it is said of him *tā kē cōrēr mār merechē* or that he has been thrashed like a thief. A child possessed of mischievous habits is often dubbed with the pet sobriquet of *dākāt* or dacoit. If a person seeks for an opportunity

of doing a certain act and gets it at last, it is said of him *cōr cāy bhāṅgā bēṛā* 'a thief seeks for a broken fencing.' A thief may elude detection for some time, but he is sure to be caught one day. This has given rise to the popular saying *cōṛēr pāc din, sādher ek din*, or a thief may escape scot-free for five days, but the good man of the house will catch him one day. Thieves are always artful dodgers, and, in allusion to their artfulness, the Bengalis say *cōr bidyā bara bidyā, jadi nā parē dharā* or that the profession of stealing is a paying one, so long as the thief is not caught. A person who steals trifles is spoken of as being a *chiñc'kē cōr*. If sound advice is given to a person, but he does not act up to it, the proverb *cōṛā nā ṣunē dharmmēr kāhinī* (preach the gospel to the devil, and he will not hear you) is applied to him. A thief cannot be detected except with the assistance of a thief. Hence the proverb *cōṛēr sandhān jāsu*, or 'set a thief to catch a thief.' A servant or any other menial, who is notorious for his thievish propensities, is often spoken of as being a *cōṛēr sardār*, or 'chief among thieves' or 'arch-thief.' If a person, without making any attempt at concealment, deprives another of a thing or otherwise defrauds him, the former is said to commit *dinē ḍākātī*, or 'robbery by broad daylight.' A Bengali bridegroom is often likened to a thief *bar nā cōr* because the former has to put up patiently with all sorts of liberties which the female members of the bride's family take with him on the day of his marriage, just as a thief, when caught, patiently suffers the maltreatment which he receives at the hands of his captors. Or this saying may refer to the form of marriage by capture prevailing in primitive communities, whereby a person has to steal or carry away by force a woman before he can marry her. The saying *cōr kē balē curī kar'tē, ḡrhasṭha kē balē sābadhān hatē* is often applied to a person who blows hot and cold in the same breath, that is to say, who tells a person to do a certain act with respect to another person, and, at the same time, tells the latter to beware of the former.